Befriending the Mind:

Easing into the Heart of Awakening

Doug Kraft

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Now we come to the heart of the matter. We've been exploring the inner landscape with particular attention to the experience of suffering and how it can be attenuated. In this chapter and the next, we'll turn to the core of the Buddha's teaching on this and everything else. It's called "dependent origination" or "dependent co-arising" (*paṭiccasamuppāda).* The Buddha said, "One who sees dependent origination sees the dhamma [or the whole of his teaching]; one who sees the dhamma sees dependent origination."[23]

The Buddha intended dependent origination to be a practical tool for cultivating awareness rather than a theoretical construct. To introduce it as a tool, let me first introduce you to the research of Eugene Gendlin, a non-Buddhist philosopher and psychotherapist.

By the 1960s, there were three branches of psychotherapy in the United States. Within each branch were many distinct schools. The oldest branch was psychoanalysis. It included Freudians, Jungians, neo-Freudians, Reichians, and more. A second and newer branch

Paṭiccasamuppāda is a Pāli term that has been translated as "dependent origination," "dependent arising," "interdependent co-arising," and "conditional arising." All these are valid and useful even though some seem to contradict others. (See "10. The Paradox of Paticcasamuppāda," pp. 157-160 for a more detailed exploration.)

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[23] "The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint: Mahā-hatthipadopama Sutta," *Majjhima Nikāya* 28:28.

was Behaviorism, including John Watson's classical conditioning, B. F. Skinner's operant conditioning, William Glasser's reality therapy, and others. The newest branch was the emerging so called "third wave" of humanist psychology, which included Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy, Fritz Perl's gestalt therapy, and Rollo May's existential therapy, to name a few.

Eugene Gendlin looked at this proliferation and asked, "Which therapy gets better results?" After years of careful research, he found that theoretical orientation made little difference. In all the schools, some clients did well, while others did not do so well.

So he honed in on the common elements in the experience of those who flourished. He found that if there was something in the therapist-client interaction that helped clients feel their own experience more deeply and intimately, they did well. If not, they didn't do so well. Gendlin called these nonverbal, bodily intuitions "felt sense." In 1978 he published a small, best-selling book called *Focusing*[24] that describes how to discover and cultivate felt sense.

In the mid 1980s, I met a colleague who had trained with Gendlin. He taught me focusing techniques. I found them remarkably effective with meditators as well as with therapy clients. At that time, mindfulness had not broken into the field of psychotherapy. But it was clear to me that awareness and insight were keys to both. The focusing technique bridged and connected the two.

I was so enthusiastic about Gendlin's process that another colleague and I began to expand the technique. As it evolved we called it "deepening."

Buddhism

Today Buddhism is in an analogous situation. There are three main branches: Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan. Within these

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[24] Bantam New Age Books, 1982.

branches are many schools. In all branches and schools, there are meditators who do well and meditators who don't do so well.

I suspect that if there is something about how meditators engage their practice that helps them sense their own experience more deeply and intimately, they do well. If not, their practice goes flat. For example if a meditator has preconceived ideas about what she should experience and looks for validation, she won't go very far. Nobody exactly fits any mold. However, if meditators are curious and are open to being surprised or perplexed, they are more likely to go further regardless of the flavor of Buddhism they use. After all, the Buddha's dying instructions were "Be a lamp unto yourself." He encouraged us to trust our own deepest experience first and foremost.

When the Buddha said seeing dependent origination is the backbone of his teaching and practice, the word *seeing* did not mean "intellectual appreciation." When we really see someone, we see more than a diagnostic category. We see them from the inside. We know how they tick, what inspires them, what frightens them, what they love, what wakes them in the night, what touches their heart. When the Buddha said, "See dependent origination," he meant an intimate, deep, direct contact with the subtleties of how life flows through us.

More than any other Buddhist teaching, dependent origination lends itself to getting lost in concepts and disconnected from direct experience. The key to effective use of dependent origination is not memorizing a list of Pāli names or their meanings. At different times, the Buddha described dependent origination as having four, eight, twelve, or more stages. However, all his descriptions move from gross to subtle, selfing (preoccupation with a personal self) to selflessness, tension to ease, and suffering to gentle freedom from distress. This overall direction is what's most important.

As with Gendlin's discovery, if we use dependent origination to help us directly touch subtle, precognitive experiences, then awareness deepens, insights emerge, and our engagement with life opens and enriches. If our use of dependent origination does not

bring us into direct contact with intuitive knowing, it is little more than a flow chart on a blackboard. It may be impressive but has little practical effect on our meditation or daily lives.

Causal Relationships

The essence of dependent origination is that everything depends on something else to cause it to arise (see "The Paradox of Paticcasamuppāda," pp. 157–160). Or more simply, everything arises from causes and conditions. Those causes and conditions arise out of other causes and conditions. And so on.

Dependent origination is a string of causal relationships. Picture a line of dominos. One falls, knocking over the next one, which knocks over the next, and so on down the line. In dependent origination, the first domino is so tiny we may not notice it. Each successive domino is a little larger. The last one is the whole catastrophe: pain, anguish, grief, despair, and bummers of all varieties.

Nature has many such causal chains that interact in a matrix in which everything directly or indirectly affects everything else. The Buddha said that understanding intimately the nature of these causal relationships is the key to his teaching, the key to meditation, and the key to spiritual freedom.

Hetupaccayo is a Pāli term for "causes and conditions." *Hetu* means "primary cause" and *paccayo* means a "supporting condition" that contributes to produce an effect or "fruit" (*phala*). Though it is often translated as "causes and conditions" there is no "and" in the Pāli term. It is a compound word combining the meanings of both to indicate all causes or conditions essential for a given result. A traditional example is a seed that is the main cause of a tree and the soil, sunlight, and water that are supporting conditions that allow the seed to germinate and grow. All causes and conditions must come together for the tree to come to fruition. *Hetupaccayo* is more precisely translated as "causesconditions." But this sounds clumsy in English.

Trigger versus Causes and Conditions

To use dependent origination as a practical tool, it helps to distinguish between the root or necessary causes and conditions of an event, and the unnecessary triggers that merely set it off. The distinction between causes and conditions is somewhat arbitrary. Causes arise and pass relatively quickly. They are easy to see. Conditions change relatively slowly. They tend to linger in the background where they are easy to overlook.

Triggers, on the other hand, may merely carry a root cause. Triggers themselves are not strictly necessary. Here are two examples:

(1) I throw a match into a field of dry grass. A wildfire ensues. If someone asks, "Why is the field on fire?" our first thought might be the match. But if the match is removed, the fire continues.

The real and necessary cause of the fire is heat. The match carried heat, but once delivered, the match itself became superfluous. The root conditions are fuel and oxygen. If heat, fuel, and oxygen are present — if they co-arise together — we have a fire. If we remove any one, the fire goes out. The match was merely a trigger that brought heat to dry grass. Once the fire is going, it provides its own heat and will keep blazing until the fuel is burned up, removed, or turned into wet grass.

If the fire was a candle, we could also put it out by removing the heat (for example, blowing on it to cool it off) or removing the oxygen (for example, covering it with a jar). But for the brushfire, the only practical solution is to deal with the grass.

Once it's pointed out that necessary conditions include not only heat but fuel and oxygen as well, we think, "Oh yes. Of course." That's typical of conditions. Initially they can be easy to miss. But once we see them, they're obvious.

Fire is a good metaphor for suffering: once triggered, it can keep burning until we recognize and deal with the true causes and conditions. This brings us to the second example.

(2) Someone says, "Doug, your talk was dumb." While meditating early the next morning, my mind grumbles, "Was my talk dumb? Am I stupid? Maybe that person is dumb. Maybe I should tell them to 'be nice!'" Rumble, rumble, rumble. I'm overrun with hindrances.

If you ask me why I'm upset, I'll probably point to the person and their insulting remark. But the person and their editorial aren't in the room as I meditate. They are long gone.

The comment was only a trigger. It implanted an irritating thought in my mind. The real cause was the mind's ability to fixate on something painful. Once there, like the heat in the field, it carried on by itself. The necessary conditions are my ego defensiveness and underlying irritability. It's easy to overlook the role of my disposition. But once I see it, it's obvious.

To reduce the suffering in our lives, it makes some sense to remove the triggers: put away the matches, avoid crass people, turn off the nightly news, and avoid things that might upset us.

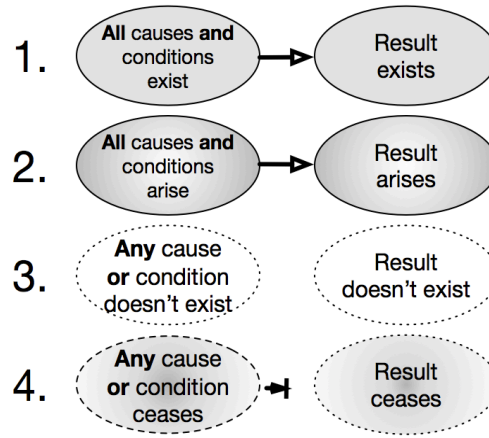
However, the world has an endless supply of matches, cigarette lighters, lightning strikes, downed power lines, and hot sparks of all kinds. It has an endless supply of insults, slights, thoughtless remarks, political inanity, and commentary on political inanity. And no matter how carefully we eat, exercise, and rest, we get sick, age, and die.

If we want peace and well-being that is more than a fleeting moment, it is wise to attend to the underlying conditions within us that make us vulnerable to the slings and arrows of the world. The Buddha encouraged us to look beyond mere triggers to what makes suffering possible and likely. To be skillful in the use of dependent origination, he suggested that the most important aspect is not what triggers suffering, but the conditions that allow suffering to continue.

Ānanda asked the Buddha, "Venerable sir, in what way can a monk be called skilled in dependent origination?" Notice the question was not "What is dependent origination?" It wasn't a

philosophical inquiry. His question was "How can one use it effectively [as a practical tool]?" The Buddha replied, "Here, Ānanda, a monk knows thus: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.'"[25]

In the statement, "this" means "causes and conditions." If we replace the word "this" with the phrase "causes and conditions," the phrase must be slightly modified to make sense. We end up with four statements: (1) if **all** causes **and** conditions exist, the result exists, (2) if **all** causes **and** conditions arise, the result arises, (3) if **any** cause **or** condition does not exist, the result does not exist, and (4) if **any** cause **or** condition ceases, the result ceases.



The most important statement is the fourth. Throughout the suttas, the Buddha advocates using dependent origination from the perspective of cessation (action 4 in the diagram). Because the Buddha was interested in relieving and eradicating suffering, he asked, "What cause or condition, if removed, results in the cessation of suffering?"

In the brush fire example, if all three causes and conditions (heat, fuel, and oxygen) co-exist together (action 1), the fire exists. If all three co-arise together (action 2), the fire arises. If any one of them does not exist (situation 3), there's no fire. Removing the match won't stop the fire! It was only a trigger. However, if any one of the causes or conditions (heat, fuel, or oxygen) ceases (situation 4), the fire goes out and will not restart.

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[25] "Bahudhātuka Sutta: The Many Kinds of Elements" (*Majjhima Nikāya* 115:11).

Vexing

Remember, dependent origination is a causal chain, not a single interaction. So to attenuate the conditions leading to suffering, we might ask, "What causes and conditions motivated me to throw the hot match into the grass?" Perhaps I was angry, upset, delusional, or wanting to get some attention. We could also ask, "What are the conditions that made it possible for me to throw a match?" These include owning a bike, liking to ride it, living near a dry field, owning matches, the invention of matches, knowing how to use matches, and more. We could also ask, "What are the causes and conditions that created the dry field?" They include the nature of grass, seasonal drought, global warming drying the field, human dependence on fossil fuels that exacerbates warming, seasonal shifts in weather, and more.

The Buddha said that trying to understand the chain of all the causes and conditions that give rise to a specific event is vexing — a polite way of saying it will drive us nuts. In the interdependent web, the combination of forces that give rise to a particular incident are potentially so numerous, varied, and complex that we don't have enough information or brainpower to figure it all out. He called such subjects "imponderables" (*acinteyya)* — topics that are not wise to pursue.

It sounds like he's saying his core teachings on dependent origination are imponderable and not worth pursuing!

Hidden in Plain Sight

To tease apart this apparent paradox, it helps to engage dependent origination less as a theory and more as a practical tool

Acinteyya is translated by different scholars as "imponderable," "inconceivable," or "unconjecturable." In describing the last two of the four *acinteyya*, the Buddha said, "The result of karma is an imponderable matter that one should not try to ponder… Speculation about the world is an imponderable matter that one should not try to ponder. One who tries to ponder [these] would reap either madness or frustration." "Acinteyya Sutta: The Four Imponderables," *Anguttara Nikāya* 4.77.

for awareness that can help us directly experience relevant subtle causes and conditions that may be hiding in plain sight. A story illustrates how they can be both obscure and apparent at the same time:

When my boys were young, the Easter Bunny used to take the eggs the boys had decorated and hide them in the yard. On Easter morning, the boys took their Easter baskets outside and scoured the yard for colored eggs. They looked under bushes, inside watering cans, and behind rocks. They found none!

The Easter Bunny always hid the eggs in plain sight. A yellow egg might be placed among yellow flowers. A red egg might be sitting in a red toy truck. A green egg might be laid on top of a tuft of new grass. All the eggs were in plain sight, but placed so that they blended in with the yard and drew no attention.

When the boys figured this out, they would stop, relax, and gaze openly around the yard. Then they saw eggs everywhere. [26]

Some of the root causes and conditions can be so subtle that we don't notice them. We need a sensitive and patient awareness that can relax and see those faint causes and conditions right under our noses.

Tools and Techniques

Here are three tools that work together to help reveal what may be hiding in plain sight. The tools are felt sense, pointers, and deepening. Some come out of Gendlin's work. Others come out of my explorations. All of them have been shaped implicitly or explicitly by the Buddha's teachings on dependent origination.

Felt Sense

The first tool is Gendlin's "felt sense." Here's an example:

Erika and I have been married for almost five decades. When we got married, I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be 48 years old much less to live with someone for 48 years.

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[26] This story can also be found in Doug Kraft, *Buddha's Map*, p. 75.

After all these years I have a pretty good felt sense of who she is: big heart, grounded wisdom, smart, kind, attuned to the communities around her, strong presence, moved by music, and more.

How I feel about her might shift from day to day: affectionate, irritated, comfortable, concerned, close, wanting more space, and so on. My feelings *toward* her may fluctuate, but my felt sense of *who she is* remains relatively steady.

Whether we're considering a person, a situation, or a hindrance, our felt sense is subtler and less colorful than emotions. But it's more important because it sets the framework for how we see that person, situation, or hindrance. "Felt sense" is another word for "conditions."

In meditation, if we have a recurring hindrance, it may be because we are attending too much to the more obvious surface attributes and less to the underlying felt sense of the whole experience.

To get a feel for the difference between emotion and felt sense, try this:

Choose a person, situation in life, hindrance, or just how this moment feels. Close your eyes and notice how you respond or react to the person, situation, hindrance, or moment. Notice if this response seems stronger in some part of your body or if it's dispersed.…

Now notice your subtler, quieter felt sense of the person, situation, hindrance, or moment.

Because emotions fluctuate more often, they are easier to see than felt sense. But if we sit quietly, we can begin to notice the difference between our emotional response to a person or experience and our underlying felt sense of that person or experience.

Pointers

In the previous exercise, you may have noticed the power of language — the words we use to denote an experience. Once we put a label on something, the label can take over and detach from the

underlying felt sense. Gendlin refers to the labels as "handles." I prefer the term "pointers," as in "It takes a finger to point to the moon, but don't confuse the finger for the moon."

Gendlin's way of working with handles is to go back and forth between the word (handle or pointer) and the direct experience.

For example, a yogi asks, "Fear has come into my meditation. What do I do with it?"

I might ask, "Does it seem to reside more in one part of the body?"

Then I suggest, "'Fear' is a word pointing to something you experience. Let go of the word and let your awareness go to the feeling itself.… Tell me what it's like."

They might say, "It's like standing outside a cave as a wolf emerges from the dark." Or, they might say, "It's like standing on a high cliff in a strong wind." Or they might say, "It's very dark and I don't know where I am."

I respond, "You used the word 'fear' to point to it. Is there a better word for pointing to your actual experience?"

If the person had seen a wolf, they might say, "'Terror' is better." If they were on a high cliff they might say, "Shaky." If they were in the dark they might say, "Alone."

After they settle into this new language, we do the process again: "Set the new pointer aside; see if the feeling relates to some part of the body. Then go back to the underlying experience. Is there a better word?"

Perhaps they find a better word. Or perhaps they return to the same word. The goal of going back and forth from the label to the raw experience is not to get the best label possible. It is to get clear about the distinction between the label and the raw experience itself. We are interested in the moon, not the finger pointing to it. We are interested in the deeper, intuitive sense, not the language.

To get a feel for pointers and underlying experience, try the following:

Go back to the person, situation, hindrance, or the moment you were exploring before or take a whole new one — whatever seems best to you. Go into your felt sense of it including body sensations, if any.

Find a word that points to your experience; let that settle in for a moment.…

Then let go of the pointer and go back to the raw experience to see if there is a better label.…

Keep going back and forth until you've found a pointer that best evokes the actual experience.

This leaves you with a word or pointer that resonates well with your actual experience.

Deepening

You may have noticed that even if you get a good pointer, often the underlying experience itself morphs. As you come into direct contact with it, awareness itself may cause your experience to deepen into something else.

This natural shifting is what I call "deepening." We let awareness go deeper into the experience and see what happens.

It's as if our experience of fear, joy, anger, or contentment is an energy field. The first part of the process is to find a relatively accurate pointer to that energy field.

The second part is to go into the energetic center of the phenomenon. If it seems like a ball of energy, we go into the middle of the ball and see what's at the center. Some people find it easier to go under that energetic field or behind it. Any of those are fine. The mind does not exist in three-dimensional space, so "going into the center," "going beneath," or "going behind" are just metaphors. Use whatever is most effective for you.

You may remember that the three essential practices of the Buddha are turning toward, relaxing into, and savoring (pp. 52-62). This is what we do in deepening. We turn toward the experience until we have a good enough pointer, relax into the core of it, and then just hang out with whatever we find. If it is an unpleasant

feeling, it may not feel like savoring as much as just letting it soak into us or us soak into it. It's all the same.

As we do this, one of three things will happen: (1) nothing changes, (2) the experience intensifies, or (3) something else comes up. For the purposes of this exercise, we don't care which happens. Any of the three is fine. We aren't trying to control the experience. Quite the opposite, we just want to relax into it and let it lead us.

To illustrate this process, consider a more complex example[27]:

Several years ago, a teacher whom I'll call "Frank" was going to co-lead a meditation group with me. Our teaching styles were different, but he was smart, knowledgeable, and an experienced teacher. Working together could provide a rich tapestry for the yogis.

As the class approached, he had an early morning epiphany: he couldn't co-lead with me. He said he didn't want a long conversation about it. But he wanted me to understand his thoughts and wrote a long email.

His central concern was that I was not tough enough. Classes provide a rare opportunity to go deeper. He felt it was important to get yogis to work hard. My experience has been that for every meditator who doesn't put in enough effort, there are 20 who put in too much effort. Over-efforting can cause the body and psyche to stiffen. If people back off and let go of the mind's stories, a natural and stable samādhi *(peacefulness) is likely to emerge. He thought my "easing awake" style would lead to a "pleasant mush," not the clarity and precision of the jhānas.*

He was also concerned that our different styles would be confusing and give rise to hindrances and discouragement for the yogis. To him, discouraging people from the dhamma was a "mortal sin." This was his tongue-in-cheek way of saying he felt strongly about it.

Since he had said he didn't want to discuss it with me, I just sent him a short note: I was disappointed that it wasn't going to work out. However, since he felt working with me would violate his integrity, I understood that he felt he had to withdraw. I wished him well.

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[27] This story is essentially true. But to give "Frank" some anonymity, I've altered some of the unessential details.

I thought my response was clear and accurate, and that it would bring closure.

It didn't bring closure. In my next meditation, my mind rumbled. Apparently I was angrier than I'd realized. I ignored the content of the rumbling and used the Six Rs to deepen into the anger itself — relaxed into its very center.

It intensified.

I kept recognizing, releasing, and relaxing, smiling, and radiating kindness out into the world only to have the mind go into another outburst.

I knew from dependent origination, that if awareness got to the subtle conditions underneath, the tension would release. Yet after several days, my mind was still nitpicking and getting more furious. I was stuck. There must've been something I was missing. I opened up more.

As I Six-R'd and deepened into the felt sense, I noticed hurt. Deepening into the center of the hurt, there was a softer tenderness. And in the center of the tenderness was loneliness. It seemed ancient and intolerable. But it was clearly there: a deep and familiar aloneness.

So I relaxed into the core of the loneliness. A week had gone by now. I was still Six-R'ing, but the mental rumbling and nitpicking had persisted and morphed into loneliness. I let go of the label "loneliness" and sunk into the felt sense of my experience. It was as if I were a piece of bamboo — hard on the outside but hollow, dark, and dusty in the middle.

As I let down into that hollowness, a thought trickled up: "Maybe Frank is right. Maybe my practice is mellow mush. Maybe I'm teaching and practicing all wrong."

The way my body responded may be surprising: it chuckled and smiled. This was the root condition of the root conditions of the root of the entire episode: I doubted my practice. Worry and doubt come easily to me. The body chuckled more as it resonated with the truth of this. It was such a relief to expose the doubt at the core of my disturbance.

Instantly the mind knew exactly what to do. I didn't have to think about it — it was obvious. I'd practice a little harder and notice the effect. Then I'd practice a little softer and notice the effect. I'd conduct an empirical trial. I didn't require anybody — any friend, or any colleague, anyone else — to tell me if my practice was optimal. I'd just experiment and find out directly in my own experience.

Suddenly I didn't care what Frank or anyone else thought. I had doubt about my practice and a sure way to find the answer. I almost laughed out loud. And I was grateful to Frank for stimulating some of the causes and conditions that helped this clarity to surface.

The body and mind became very deep and peaceful as everything faded but awareness itself. Even that thinned out.

Skilled

That story illustrates a way for a monk or lay meditator to be skilled in dependent origination. The art of it is to find the root conditions of suffering and remove them by relaxing into them. We don't try to remove the suffering directly. That would be acting out of aversion. Acting out of disliking sets up more suffering. Instead we look for the root conditions and simply open up and relax into them.

The way to find the root is not to analyze or figure things out. Root causes and conditions are often far subtler than thoughts, concepts, and ideas. The intellect can't go deep enough. But awareness can.

So we set aside our labels and open more directly to the felt sense. As we do, the sense may morph and change. We don't control the morphing and changing. We just follow it until it releases on its own.

Secret Weapon

Notice that we don't even remove the root conditions. We have a secret weapon to do that for us. It's called "pure awareness." Pure awareness sees things on their own terms without trying to do anything about them. It's not based on controlling or fixing. Our secret weapon is awareness with no agenda.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger described it this way: imagine an awareness that sees to the heart of suffering with no urge to fix anything. Imagine that this awareness is the opposite of indifference. In other words, imagine an awareness that is deeply engaged and so loving that it has no need to control, change, or fix anything.

That is the kind of awareness the Buddha recommended.

This pure awareness has a magic property. It soothes the mind-heart. As it soothes, tension relaxes. As it relaxes, it clarifies. As it clarifies, insight and wisdom arise in due time.

There is no metaphysical explanation for it. It's just the nature of agendaless awareness. It's like gravity. Why does gravity hold objects to the earth? There is no reason. It's just its nature. It's just what it does. Why does awareness soothe and relax? There is no reason. It's just its nature. It's just what it does.

The trick is to look at what's going on without trying to change it — simple seeing. When we recognize something clearly, the mind releases its grip on it and relaxes. As it relaxes, uplifted qualities flow in and naturally radiate outward. If some tension comes back, the mind patiently repeats the Six Rs.

In other words, to use dependent origination skillfully, we use awareness skillfully. If it doesn't work, it's because awareness is not yet deep or subtle enough — there is probably another condition beneath that felt sense. We don't try to analyze it or figure it out. We let our secret weapon — awareness — look for what we're missing. Attuning to felt sense, distinguishing between pointers and experience, and deepening into what arises gives awareness the space it needs to do its job.

We care for awareness. Then awareness cares for us.

When awareness reaches a root condition, we'll feel it as a release. It might be a little chuckle like mine. It may be just a feeling of relief or ease. Or awareness may just fade into nothingness.

Our job is never to figure things out. It is to invite this pure, guileless, unassuming awareness to see the truth of what's here.

This is how to be skilled in dependent origination.

If you'd like to try it out:

Close your eyes and see what presents itself.…

Notice if you feel it in the body. Notice your felt sense of whatever arises.

The mind may put a label on it. That's fine. The mind does the labeling on its own. (The labeling is called vicāra in Pāli.) You can let go of the label pointing to the experience and come back to the experience itself.…

Now, whatever you experience, relax right into the core of it. See what it's like in the center. It may feel the same at the center as it does from a distance. Or it may intensify. Or something else may come up.

All these possibilities are fine. We aren't controlling. We're surrendering into awareness.

Just follow awareness.…

If something different comes up, repeat the process and go to its center and see what happens.…

Corollaries

This process is not how I first learned dependent origination. First, I memorized one of the specific maps of dependent origination. Then I tried to recognize the specific events in my own experience. I wasn't very skilled.

To be skilled in dependent origination, we first learn to feel for the underlying felt sense of whatever our experience is. And to do this we set aside our concepts and labels to go directly into the preverbal experience. It helps to let go and follow that experience with an agendaless awareness, and to allow it to deepen and change naturally on its own.

Once we have that skill, learning some of the traditional maps of dependent origination may help refine our awareness. We'll look at those maps in the next chapter.

But without the skills of felt sense, separating pointers from what's pointed to, and deepening, the maps of dependent origination may be so abstract as to not be so helpful.

The skillful use of dependent origination is allowing a preverbal, precognitive, intuitive awareness to settle into the core of experience without any agenda other than seeing what's there and following the unfolding awareness until the mind, on its own, releases and dissolves.

Here are five corollaries of these practical tools:

1: Don't Change Anything

Don't try to change or fix anything. Just sense root conditions with agendaless awareness.

2: No Blame

The fact that root conditions are often elusive is not a moral failure. It's a by-product of evolution. Ancestors who honed in on the wolf running across the field toward them were more likely to pass along their DNA than those who fixated on the tree on the edge of the field. We aren't to blame for the laws of evolutionary selection. But we don't have to be limited by those tendencies bred into us.

3: Relax

If awareness remains stuck or doesn't release and dissolve, something subtler is going on that awareness has missed. Gently ask, "What am I missing?" Drop the questions, thoughts, ideas, even labels, and open up more to feel any other subtleties. Then relax into those. Be patient. Give awareness the space to do its job.

4: Savor

When awareness reaches the root of a causal chain and goes deeply enough into it, the condition will release. We can't force it. But when awareness goes deep enough, we can't resist it either. It may be felt as a laugh, a smile, a sense of well-being, or quiet relief. However it manifests, let it soak in. There's no need to grab hold of it — it's counterproductive to try. However, it is wise to deeply savor a good feeling while it's there. This builds up a reservoir of equanimity. When the next burning match, insult, or bad news comes along, that reservoir serves as a shock absorber. We are less reactive. Our peace becomes more stable.

5: Tenderness and Spaciousness

Underneath hurt there is always tenderness — without tenderness, there is no hurt. Underneath the tenderness is spaciousness — without spaciousness there is no tenderness. If we want more spaciousness and the wisdom and clarity that comes with

it, the fastest route is not to run from our experience but to deepen into it until the natural, underlying vastness of the impersonal mind-heart is exposed. (This model is also explored on pp. 39-42 and pp. 51-52.)